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Imagining China on Greenland's Road to Independence

Ulrik Pram Gad, Naja Dyrendom Graugaard, Anders Holgersen, Marc Jacobsen, Nina Lave & Nikoline Schriver

For decades, Greenlandic politicians have sought independence in international politics and economy. Renewed global interest in the Arctic has given new impetus to a strategy of diversifying the existing dependency relations, as a way to put coloniality behind. This article investigates how Greenlandic foreign policy narratives have cast China in different roles that support this strategy. Some narratives are informed by Orientalist tropes imported from Denmark, while others dismiss the very same tropes. Some embrace Chinese partners as crucial on Greenland's road to independence, while others reject China as imperialist. Mainly, China has been imagined as a potent source of material resources (export revenues, investments, labour). Initially, this narrative was employed to support a business attempt to reinvigorate traditional hunting through new export channels. Later, narratives underscored Greenlandic ambitions as a mining country. Recently, they have backed a Greenlandic search for new solutions to the less-hyped fishing and tourism industries. Besides the promise of material gains, Greenlandic authorities have also imagined China as an occasion for international recognition. However, the sought for recognition has changed drastically, from the time when Greenland's national team played soccer against Tibet to current attempts to negotiate science, infrastructure and paradiplomacy with Beijing and Copenhagen. The analysis is based on media reports, government foreign policy statements and parliamentary debates 1999-2018. Theoretically, the analysis draws on a tradition of analyzing international politics and foreign policy as driven by narratives constructing nation state identities in relation to Others, focusing particularly on Orientalist tropes and anti-colonial alternatives.

Introduction: China Diversifying Greenland's Dependence¹

Since the establishment of Home Rule in 1979, Greenland has worked towards enhancing independent agency in international politics. This has been a central part of an overall strategy to break with the dependency on Denmark, a legacy of Danish colonization. The renewed global interest in the Arctic has given new impetus to efforts to diversify the existing dependency relations as a way to put coloniality behind. Greenland has for decades pursued relations with other Inuit polities across the Circumpolar North, Nordic collaborators, the UN, the USA (Jacobsen & Gad 2018) and the EU (Gad, 2016). The increased interest in the Arctic has benefitted these efforts.

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Also, as part of this interest, much attention – domestic and international – has been given to the possible role of China in the future of Greenland. Hence, this article is concerned with the ways in which China features in Greenlandic national narratives, foreign policy strategies, and visions for the future. Particularly, we examine the different Greenlandic castings of Chinese actors (the Chinese state, Chinese consumers, Chinese companies, Chinese workers), and how these castings reflect specific ways of placing Greenland on the global scene. We detect Greenlandic discourses about China in official documents, speeches, media statements, and interventions in public debate.² Empirically, our analysis focuses on the narratives about where Greenland is heading, told by official Greenlandic representatives and representatives for interest organizations in both the domestic and the international arena. In certain instances, Danish and other voices are included to illuminate the contexts, contrasts and connections that shape Greenlandic discourses. We focus on public discourse since this is key in shaping the universe of options available to domestic and international actors.³ Increasingly (and in sharp contrast to Danish narratives of China in Greenland), Greenlandic casting of China appears to be settling as that of a constructive force in the process of culminating economic and legal independence. Before turning to what these Chinese are specifically imagined to be doing, we briefly introduce the wider configuration of Greenlandic identity narratives in which Chinese actors are given roles, and the theoretical concept Orientalism which informs our analysis.⁴

Analyzing Greenlandic Foreign Policy as Self/Other Narratives

Theoretically, the analysis draws on the tradition of analyzing international politics and foreign policy as driven by narratively structured discourses which construct nation state identities in relation to different Others.⁵ Fundamental to this tradition is the notion that if there was no difference, one could not meaningfully talk about identity. On the one hand, any identity needs a radical Other to exist (Derrida, 1988: 52; Connolly, 1991: 64f; Campbell, 1998: ix-x). On the other hand, identity narratives seldom just relate the identity of the self to one other – most often a whole cast of characters is involved (Ricoeur, 1988: 248; Hansen, 2006: 40; Gad, 2010: 38, 418).

Postcolonial works have demonstrated that the orientalized Other has been central to constructing an image of superior Western identities. Strategically, binaries have been used to legitimize the exploitative relations between Euro-American imperialist states and their colonies. One classic figure is the passive Orient in need of Western vital intervention to be productive; another is the insertion in the Other of a desire to fulfil the needs of its master (Saïd, 1979). More generally, as a basic mode of Othering, Orientalism constructs identity by describing the Other as a complete contrast to the Self: if Self is light, Other is dark (Baumann, 2004: 19-21; Gad, 2010: 148). In relation to China, Western Orientalism took a specific form emphasizing Chinese intransience as China resisted outright territorial colonization. In extension, imageries of a ‘yellow wave’ rolling out of China have recirculated in Western discourses (Sejersen, 2013). In some Orientalist discourses, positive qualities may be assigned to the Other to match negative ones attached to the Self (Baumann 2004: 19-21). However, core to the imperialist function of Orientalism – even in the versions valuing the other positively – is that as a discourse, it closes itself off to input from the Other (Saïd, 1979; Gad, 2010: 158-160).

An ‘Arctic Orientalism’ (Fienup-Riordan, 1990) was also pivotal to the colonization of the Arctic and its Indigenous populations and it continues to define Inuit as the Eskimo Other in its (post)colonial relations to their colonizing states (Fienup-Riordan, 1990; Wenzel, 1991; Thisted,

2002; Bjørst, 2008; Graugaard, 2009). As part of this, Denmark has since the beginning of colonization forwarded essentialized images of Greenland to mirror what Denmark was not (Bjørst, 2008: 9). For example, Greenlanders have been constructed as uncivilized and primitive, lazy and ineffective, less developed and child-like, unhygienic and amoral (Trondheim, 2002). In other periods, different colonial projects serving different purposes have stereotyped Greenlanders in what appears to be positive contrast to Europeans – as peaceful, forgiving, natural people (Pedersen, 1997). However, also in this laudatory mode, the Orientalist mirroring has less to do with the Greenlanders than with projects to dominate or reform them – or to reform Europeans at home.

Meanwhile, the emergence of a collective *kalaallit* (Greenlandic) identity was seemingly provoked through the encounter with Danish *qallunaat* [white people] (Sonne, 1996: 245). This legacy has prompted contemporary identity discourses in which representations of Greenlanders and Danes appear as antithetical (Trondheim, 2002; cf. Sørensen, 1991). Here, Greenlandic representations depict Danes as primarily power-hungry, dominant, efficient, materialistic and individualistic (Trondheim, 2002). In this identity landscape, the idea of ‘authenticity’ has gained a foothold. Arguably, early colonial notions of the natural Eskimo hunter, who either lived in harmony with nature or was corrupted by civilization (Pedersen, 1997), reverberate in the current Greenlandic identity discourses. To have an authentic Greenland depends on the presence of people in coastal communities who speak Greenlandic, subsist through hunting, provide *kalaalimerngit* [Greenlandic food], and sell sealskin to *qallunaat* (Gad, 2005: 66ff; 2016: 46).

However, these iconic elements of ‘authenticity’ co-exist with modern elements of Greenlandic everyday life and visions of what Greenland is and should become. The colonial establishment of national institutions in Greenland during the 19th century – most pertinently, a nationally circulated newspaper, local and regional advisory councils, a college educating teachers and catechists to ‘elevate’ the people – produced the idea that Greenland constituted a nation, which was submitted to but separate from the Danish state (Thuesen, 1988; Wilhjelm, 2008). The new Greenlandic elite instituted by these institutions historically supported a number of reforms, which were to ‘modernize’ Greenland (Heinrich, 2012). In effect, 100 HP outboard motors, the internet, Canadian Goose outdoor gear, democracy and welfare services are all elements which are central to talking about contemporary and future Greenland. In other words, they are indispensable elements of collective Greenlandic identity. At the same time, they also appear as signifiers of cultural ‘decline’, as iconic elements of traditional culture has been crowded out by elements of modernity (Gad, 2005: Ch. 3.4).

In sum, much political discourse in Greenland hinges on reconciling a narrative of a decline of tradition with a narrative of modernisation. In the combination of these two narratives, most Greenlandic politicians cast Denmark as the one preventing the resurrection of Greenlandic identity in the form of an independent nation state (Gad, 2005: 46f). As long as the constitutional link to Denmark exists, Denmark stands in the way of Greenlandic independence. The only way to legitimize this link in the eyes of the dominant mainstream of Greenlandic politics, is if Denmark can present itself as selflessly assisting Greenland in becoming independent (Gad, 2016: Ch. 7).⁶ When stitching these two basic narratives together – that of Denmark as a threat to Greenlandic authenticity, and that of Denmark as a model of modernity to emulate – an ever-wider cast of characters has been involved in new narrative twists.

As the following will show, the casting of China has oscillated between links to tradition and to modernity, and between the positive and the negative. At times, Greenlandic narratives of China reproduce a classic Orientalist trope known from Western discourse; the Other selflessly standing ready, desiring to fulfil the need of the Self. Conversely, recirculation of Danish fears for various forms of ‘yellow waves’ are also featured.⁷ Sometimes, the contrast to China sometimes end up reproducing ‘Arctic Orientalist’ notions of the lazy, child-like Eskimo unfit for modernity. Even those Greenlandic narratives involving China that go beyond Orientalism, point to very different conclusions: towards severing relations in anticolonial solidarity – and towards intensifying direct relations, to get to know the Other first hand.

***A Greenlandic Seal-Meat Business Adventure in China*⁸**

When the Greenlandic business project, Puisi A/S, was developed in 1995, China surfaced as a lucrative market for what was envisioned to become Greenland’s first seal meat export. With intentions of innovating and producing seal sausage and seal oil capsules for keen Chinese consumers, the initiators of the Puisi project imagined China as a new prosperous asset to the Greenlandic national economy and as a cure to the struggling Greenlandic sealing economies. Inuit seal hunters – considered to constitute Greenland’s traditional, national profession (Rud, 2006) – had been challenged severely since the global sealskin market collapsed in the nineteen-eighties, in the aftermath of massive anti-sealing campaigns in Western countries (Wenzel 1996; ICC 1996). By turning the seal meat, which is usually reserved for subsistence use, into products for the Chinese market, Puisi A/S was believed to provide more favorable outcomes from seal hunting (Sermitsiaq, 1999c). Yet, the ambitions of the project extended beyond merely recovering the Greenlandic seal hunting profession. Puisi’s business plan was based on expectations of instant and large revenues from its trade with China, predicting a kilo price of 500 DKK and more than 500 million DKK in revenues during the first half decade of export (Holmsgaard, 1999a; Lichtenberg, 2000; Qvist, 2017: 261). In this sense, Puisi’s anticipated profits would – channelled to the public purse through ownership and taxes, but also by reducing the need to subsidize hunting settlements – work to ameliorate the dependency on Danish block transfers and make an example of Greenlandic-steered development.

Puisi’s visions were initially welcomed by hunters, politicians and the general public in Greenland. Greenland’s Home Rule Government, too, backed the company with approximately 20 million DKK over the following years. Furthermore, leading Greenlandic politicians Jonathan Motzfeldt (S) and Lars Emil Johansen (S) were pushing the project forward, periodically engaged as Board members. While being prime minister, Johansen was a primary initiator of the project, supported by his ministerial secretary H.P. Barlach Christensen. Later, Christensen became the director of the Puisi company. They developed the business vision in collaboration with an American, David Stevens, who claimed to have invented a method to extract the taste of seal from the meat, thus making it more attractive to international consumers (Lichtenberg 2000). Appointed as a liaison between Greenland and China, Stevens was placed in Beijing. Here, he was to build up Puisi’s Chinese daughter company, *Sino-Am-Arctic*, and a factory to process Greenlandic seal oil in DanDong in North Eastern China. Meanwhile, Motzfeldt, then head of the *Inatsisartut* (the Greenlandic Parliament), promoted Puisi A/S to potential Greenlandic voters as a good example of autonomous business development – thereby, indicating that the project was independent of Danish involvement. Home Rule officials advocated for the project in Southern Greenland, which

was to be home to Puisi's Greenlandic headquarters. They encouraged private investments and urged local hunters to re-build their boats and acquire new equipment to accommodate the new Chinese demand for seal (Lichtenberg, 2000; Sørensen & Ipsen, 2003; Netredaktionen, 2010; Holmsgaard, 1999a: 6). The Puisi project received extended local support in the town of Nanortalik, where the seal meat processing factory was being built (Sermitsiaq, 1999c: 9). In a newspaper interview, Mayor Nicolai Ludvigsen (S) flagged a vacuum-packed seal sausage and exclaimed: "I hold Greenland's future in my hand" (Sermitsiaq, 1999b: 11).

While instigating busy and growing seal hunting activity in southern Greenland, Puisi's business plan was also object to extended critique from the Greenlandic public and social media (Qvist, 2017: 257-258). Viewing Puisi's lofty ambitions as disproportionate and risky, the Greenlandic newspaper, Sermitsiaq, described the project as "dangerous gambling" (Holmsgaard, 1999a: 6). As the project developed, several problematics surfaced in the media: Puisi's liquidity appeared to be dissolving, and the required veterinary, export, and import permissions were missing. For this reason, Puisi's first and only export was rejected by Chinese authorities in the harbour of DanDong. Shortly after the company's initial trial production of seal sausages, Puisi A/S crashed in 2000 (Lichtenberg, 2000; Netredaktionen, 2010; Sørensen & Ipsen, 2003). While Puisi's board was accused of misconduct and the budget was criticized for being highly unrealistic, the Greenlandic confidence in China's desire for seal trade also turned out to be presumptuous. Economic statistics regarding the Chinese demand for seal sausages were, actually, still unknown. The only indication of consumers' willingness to buy Puisi's sausages had been a three-day 'market study' in a Chinese mall. Here, a Greenlandic representative had handed out taste samples and questionnaires, and seemingly received positive responses. As it turned out, the overall predictions of a lucrative trade partnership were based on airy imaginations. This was confirmed when a Greenlandic delegation found David Stevens in a rented office space in Beijing, no daughter company, and a non-existing factory in DanDong (Lichtenberg, 2000; Qvist, 2017: 258).

Puisi A/S was initially applauded for being a project which resolved the economic challenges to Inuit seal hunting, while supporting Greenlandic-steered business development. In this sense, Puisi A/S engaged in a new narrative in which the Indigenous hunting culture was reframed from being 'the age-old heritage' to being a considerable contributor to Greenland's national economy and, implicitly, greater national independence. In this postcolonial narrative, China gained a crucial role in Greenland's search for new partnerships that would break with the existing colonial relations and the legacy of dependence on Danish finance. Puisi's director, Barlach Christensen, stressed the extraordinary market advantages in China, stating that: "China is no longer like many would remember it from childhood. In Beijing, there are five-six million wealthy people. They are Puisi's target group, and there is lots and lots of money to earn" (Qvist, 2017: 257). In this way, China figured as a constructive economic force in Greenland's independence process. However, she arguably also became an object of Greenlandic national desires, being portrayed as a nation easily available and accessible to fulfil Greenland's needs. In this sense, the anticipated relationship also reproduced an Orientalist trope according to which China was simply cast as ready and waiting for Puisi A/S with big capital, cheap labour, and an insatiable market. Noticeably, Puisi A/S expected to pay Chinese factory workers a wage which was far below Chinese average wages (Holmsgaard, 1999b: 7). Furthermore, the figure of 500 DKK per kilo of seal meat was seemingly not shared with Puisi's Chinese branch *Sino-Am-Arctic*; Davis Stevens apparently expected a price of 15 DKK per kilo (Lichtenberg 2000). In this light, Puisi's attempt to diversify Greenland's dependency

relations also entailed reducing China in a new Orientalized image focused on profitability to suit the needs of this new Greenlandic enterprise.

Puusi A/S may also have compromised Greenland's national self-image and the Greenlandic hunting culture, at large. The future visions of industrializing seal meat for export contrasted the existing Greenlandic national narratives, which had emphasized the role of seal hunting in subsistence and as an Inuit cultural practice (Graugaard, 2019). These narratives have been central in the defence of Greenland's Indigenous hunting practices and in response to anti-sealing condemnations in Western countries (Jacobsen, 2015: 109; e.g. Lynge, 1992). Metaphorically speaking, Puusi's postcolonial strategy in China also involved removing the "taste" of Greenland. The characteristic taste of seal was practically extracted from seal meat and replaced with the more desirable flavor of "hot'n'sweet". As the manager of the factory in Nanortalik explained to Sermitsiaq: "the characteristic taste of seal meat – that we value so much in Greenland but that other countries frown upon – is slowly washed away" (Sermitsiaq, 1999c: 14).

Playing Tibet in Anti-Colonial Solidarity⁹

A few years later, Greenland in 2001 played a football match against Tibet. The match was conceived as the brainchild of supporters of the Dalai Lama's Tibetan government-in-exile (Nybrandt & Mikkelsen, 2016), and sponsored by the image-conscious Buddhist CEO of the Danish *Hummel* sport clothes brand (Mortensen, 2007). The Greenlandic soccer association welcomed the match, signalling sympathy and identification with another colonized people who were denied access to official FIFA tournaments. Here, the Chinese government, alongside Denmark, were positioned as oppressors intruding on a peaceful, indigenous people. As a consequence, the Chinese government followed up by issuing threats to the Greenlandic shrimp exports. The Home Rule Government cautiously attempted to defuse the problems: While explaining the freedoms of association and assembly to the Chinese government, the Home Rule also highlighted the possible economic consequences of the match to the Greenlandic soccer association.¹⁰ Eventually, the organizers managed to lease a stadium in Copenhagen, and the two teams played accompanied by much flag-waving.

Every now and then, the Tibetan issue resurfaces in Greenlandic politics – implicitly bringing along the negative casting of China. Sara Olsvig (IA), at that time the leader of the opposition, suggested that Greenland should send an official invitation to the Dalai Lama to make clear that Greenland is in favor of human rights (*Inatsisartut*, 2015, EM14, 05:45:12). Vittus Qujaukitsoq, then Minister of Foreign Affairs (S), replied that "It would be interesting if the Dalai Lama from Tibet was invited to Greenland. I think that you in the *Inatsisartut* must assess what is most important: trade, climate or human rights. What do you find most important?" (*Inatsisartut* 2015, EM14, 05:47:57). Both Qujaukitsoq's smug smile when delivering the retort and the fact that the Dalai Lama has still not been invited indicate that Greenland's international relations with China is back to business. After the introduction of Self-Government in 2009, the negative casting of China in anti-colonial solidarity with Tibet has faded to the background and, instead, the role as economic partners resurfaced. Particularly, hopes have been high that Chinese investments in mining would make full Greenlandic independence possible.

***Chinese Mining Investments Underwriting Independence*¹¹**

The Self-Government Act (*Folketinget*, 2009, article 2 and 7) facilitated that the Government of Greenland gained responsibility of the administration of and revenues from minerals and oil extraction which had previously fallen under the Danish state. In continuation, the Large-Scale Projects Act (*Inatsisartut*, 2012) was meant to kick-start foreign investments in mining. The rationale was that if ever the extractive industries should make a difference for the Greenlandic economy, projects should be of an altogether different scale than hitherto seen (Rosing et al., 2014: 9). Moreover, all parties agreed that Greenland's national economy needed a boost: Firstly, demographic prognoses predicted rising costs of the existing public services (GØR, 2012: 34; Sejersen, 2019). Secondly, the 2009 Act on Self-Government (§9) had 'frozen' the size of the Danish subsidies to Greenland budget in return for Greenland taking over the right to expected revenues from minerals and oil extraction. The size of the 'block grant' was generally taken to be an immediate sign of the degree of dependence. This was exemplified in the remarks by one of the Greenlandic MPs in the Danish parliament, Doris Jacobsen (S): "any increase in the block grant means that Greenland's dependence on Denmark increases. And vice versa, any decrease in the block grant is a clear new step on the road to Greenland's independence" (in *Folketinget*, 2012, December 18). Sara Olsvig (IA), then serving as the other Greenlandic MP, explained how the ambition of developing a welfare state added to the financial task ahead: "we need to find new sources of income to our economy, if we want to uphold our welfare system ... they will not fall from the sky. We have to create them ourselves, and raw materials are almost the only option" (in *Folketinget*, 2012, December 18). In this view, obtaining independence from Denmark, without compromising the level of welfare, necessitates inviting foreign mining companies and global capital investments. As summarized by the Government when presenting the 'large scale act': "there is no real alternative to establishing mining and large-scale if Greenland is to achieve a self-sustaining economy within a foreseeable number of years" (Naalakkersuisut, 2012).

The (relatively) small companies which are active in the initial part of the 'food chain' in the global mining industry (prospecting, project development) are, for the most part, Canadian or Australian. Meanwhile, both these companies and the Government of Greenland look to China for investment in and implementation of large scale projects (Zeuthen & Raftopolous, 2018). Greenlandic politicians were all up in arms to secure that foreign companies in general did not run away with Greenlandic riches (Schrøder, 2013: 64-66). Nevertheless, the idea that mining particularly meant Chinese did not bother the then Greenlandic prime minister Kuupik Kleist (IA), who retorted a question from a journalist: "Are the Chinese worse than other capitalists?... Once, the Europeans colonized the rest of the world. They have ruthlessly exploited everything. Now, the economic center is shifting to the East" (Andersen, 2013).¹² However, the Chinese involvement in Greenlandic mining projects disturbed Danish politicians who began debating the prospects of large-scale mining in Greenland in the Danish media and parliament in 2012 and 2013.¹³ Ostensibly, the reason for the Danish parliament to debate the issue was the formality that granting residence permits to foreigners was still under Danish jurisdiction. While the Danish debates partly tended to the Chinese workforce (as we will return to), it was arguably firstly and lastly framed by geopolitical imaginations. In these debates, Danish right-wing politicians repeatedly pointed out China as a threat. They did so by invoking images of three distinct 'yellow waves': First, a yellow wave of Chinese influence threatening the link between Greenland and Denmark; second, a yellow wave of Chinese influence overwhelming Greenland as such; and

finally, a yellow wave of Chinese workers washing away individual Greenlandic workers, gains from collective bargaining, as well as Greenlandic national identity. While the first two threats constructed resonated scarcely in Greenlandic politics, the latter were taken more seriously.

At the grandest scale, Danish politicians issued warnings that China “might be interested in establishing a bastion in the Arctic area” (Frederiksen in Haslund & Burhøi, 2013) and “the consequences [for the global balance of power] of idly watching, while China expands, are ... incalculable and even more ungovernable” (Nørby & Bech, 2013). Hence, Danish politicians presented China as a threat to “the overall security political interests of the ‘Community of the Realm’” (Nørby & Bech, 2013). Constructing China as a threat to the ‘Community of the Realm’, however, did not resonate in Greenland. Here attention is focused more on the inequality of the members of the realm, formally and otherwise, than on valuing the community as such (Gad, 2016: 53). This is particularly the case within the realm of security politics, where Greenland’s role has primarily been that of a pawn of Danish dealings with the US (Rahbek-Clemmensen & Henriksen, 2017), rather than the preferred role as an agent in its own right. In short, Greenlandic political discourse has trouble identifying with the security interests of the Danish state (cf. Gad, 2016: 76-8).

Second, Danish politicians presented China as a threat to Greenland. One prominent member of parliament declared to be “worried that Greenland will not reform its economy, but just become dependent on, for example, Chinese money. ... It is a generally acknowledged fact, that those who bring the money, gradually gain more and more political influence” (Frederiksen, 2013). Ironically, in a Greenlandic perspective, this statement comes across as a rather accurate description of the present relation between Greenland and Denmark – the very relation, Greenlanders are set on breaking free from, in various degrees, directions and haste (Gad, 2016: 117). Moreover, Danish politicians sometimes followed up on the threat by casting Denmark as the adult with a separate responsibility for averting the Chinese threat, if the Greenlanders do not themselves take it seriously (cf. Sejersen, 2013): “Greenland will not stand a chance. The judgment of history on us will be stone hard if we – in the critical moment – sit still, hands in lap, when we could have acted and hindered what could become a veritable catastrophe for Greenland” (Dahl, 2013). The effect of this paternalism was to reinforce Greenlanders' sense of subjugation, and served mainly to affirm Greenlandic separatism (Gad, 2016: 36-44, 112).

In contrast to the Danish right-wing opposition, the official Danish position presented by the Social Democratic prime minister at the time downplayed the threat: “If you read the newspapers you could get the impression ... that there are already thousands of Chinese in Greenland ... and that the Chinese are free to pull rare earths and uranium up from the Greenlandic underground, which they will then automatically be free to dispose of. Of course, none of those things are correct” (Statsministeriet, 2013). On a more principled note, the prime minister insisted on a hands-off policy: “Basically, we need to respect that the Greenlanders are the masters of their own country” (Thorning-Schmidt in Ritzau, 2013). However, even if the prime minister also rejects a third threat, this threat has more resonance in Greenland: “I have been asked, what consequences it has, if Chinese are pouring out in the streets of Greenland. We should not sit and yell at each other, how it would be terrible if the Chinese take over the Greenlandic society” (Thorning-Schmidt in Ritzau, 2013).

Chinese Workers Undermining Welfare and Nation

The need expressed by the Government of Greenland for a special law on ‘large scale projects’ pertains primarily to the workforce needed. General Greenlandic regulations serve to ensure that local workers are employed before employers can import labor from abroad (Carlsen, 2005). However, as explicated in the introduction of the Bill in parliament, a project may be of such magnitude, that – particularly in the establishment phase – Greenland alone cannot possibly supply the workforce necessary (Schrøder, 2013: 76). Hence, the need for what was interchangeably discussed as ‘foreign labour’ or just ‘Chinese’ (cf. Berthelsen, 2012b). These foreign or Chinese workers were pointed out as threats in two distinct ways.

Most immediately, Chinese workers were presented as a threat to Greenlandic workers, as the conditions under which they would work constituted “social dumping” (Berthelsen, 2012b; Silis 2012). The leader of the main Greenlandic trade union, Jess Berthelsen, identified the threat as directed towards the labor market as such: “I strongly warn against the current government, in a reckless moment of enthusiasm, wrecking the Greenlandic labor market and bombing us all the way back to the Stone age” (2012b). As Sejersen (2013) notes, ethnic equality in the labor market was a central part of Greenlandic postcolonial visions. Drawing on memories of past injustices, he called for solidarity: “SIK has for decades been fighting to secure that natives do not get paid less than those called here to work. ... Should we now allow workers from other countries to be paid a lower salary?” (Berthelsen, 2012a). A Danish politician joined in: “I can hardly imagine that a Chinese mining company will hire as much as a single Greenlander, if the mining company can get away with paying a Chinese worker much less.” (Nørby, 2012a). However, the Greenlandic minister for business development and extractive industries, Ove Karl Berthelsen (IA), argued that Greenlandic wages were not the relevant point of comparison; the workers would remain Chinese: “You have to look at the size of peoples’ cost of living. If they get the SIK union minimum wage, they will receive an amount which is maybe 2-3 times more than their compatriots in China.” (Dollerup-Scheibel, 2012c: 5). Moreover, the minister for finance, Maliina Abelsen (IA), explained, importing Chinese workers – and even paying them less than Greenlandic workers – was lesser evils justified by a greater good: “It is easy to demand of foreign companies that immigrant labor shall have a high salary, so that we will not be accused of social dumping. But we risk that the large scale projects will not be established, and then the future of the Greenlandic welfare society looks dark.” (Kristensen, 2012: 10; cf. Sejersen, 2013: 12). In this government narrative, Chinese workers do not amount to a yellow wave wiping away Greenlandic workers. Rather, China is back in one of the roles they were casted in in relation to the Pusi project: passively waiting to contribute their – low pay – work to the rise of an independent Greenland.

At a more general level, the Chinese workers were presented as a threat – perhaps more diffuse, but also potentially more severe – to Greenland being *Kalaallit Nunaat*, literally ‘the land of the Greenlanders’. Echoing the bad reputation of the Danish led modernization drive of the fifties, sixties and seventies, the employer’s association *Grønlands Arbejdsgiverforening* – adopting a somewhat unexpected rhetoric for an organization often perceived to be dominated by Danes – warned that, “We should not risk ending up as bystanders, merely looking at the development” (Dollerup-Scheibel 2012a: 23). Their specific aim may have been, rather than local employment, to secure that “the arrangements should make it possible for local companies [sic] to be part of the project on equal terms” (Dollerup-Scheibel, 2012b: 16). But the industrialists also worried

about the popular legitimacy of basing an independent economy on Chinese workers: “How will ... a massive immigration of foreign labor to a large-scale project influence a local community ...? The time is ripe for having a thorough, popular debate on the many, great challenges, this will cause.” (Sørensen, 2012). Again, Danish right-wing politicians made sure to amplify the worries by comparing Greenland with Africa, conjuring up “the great economic, social and cultural consequences of thousands of Chinese people come to Greenland to work in the mines. In Africa, we have seen that Chinese workers in the establishment phase of the mines lead to Chinese workers in the operation phase of the mine and in many other positions around society. ... Let us not repeat the mistakes from Africa” (Nørby, 2012b). The Greenlandic minister for business development and extractive industries, once again, retorted by insisting that the Chinese would never really be present in Greenlandic society – arguing in relation to the most prominent mining plans at the time, that “it is a project, that is situated 150 km out in the empty at the edge of the inland ice. I do not count on temporary migrant labor just popping by downtown Nuuk after closing time” (ibid.). Nevertheless, others were eagerly waiting to engage the ‘yellow wave’ expected: The press reported about entrepreneurial businessmen ready to facilitate the thousands of temporary migrant workers (Oehlenschäger, 2012) as well as about people in Nuuk (including, in private capacity, the top civil servant in the Government of Greenland) attending Chinese language classes (Qvist, 2013; DR, 2013).

When newspapers finally, in 2017, reported that “Now, the first Chinese have arrived” (Sermitiaq, 2017a), the news clashed severely with the central national narratives of Greenland’s past and future. Chinese workers never came in large numbers as was imagined a decade ago, much less bringing in the billions needed to allow a mining adventure to underwrite Greenlandic independence.¹⁴ Rather, groups of Chinese workers were imported to work – on the standard conditions of the Greenlandic labor market – in fish factories. A separate aim of regulating fisheries in Greenland is to secure onshore jobs in towns and settlements along the coast, lest all the catch is produced on industrial trawlers and exported without ever touching shore in Greenland (Becker Jacobsen, 2019). This regulation is intended to secure that as much of the territory of Greenland as possible is inhabited by Greenlanders, engaged in ‘Greenlandic’ trades (Gad, 2005). On this background, importing Chinese workers to do quintessentially Greenlandic jobs came as an embarrassment. The chief human resource officer of Royal Greenland, the publicly owned fishing enterprise tasked with generating both export revenues and decentralized jobs, explained that the reason for importing foreign workers was that “we cannot get enough stable, local labor from Greenland” (Kruse, 2018a).

In sum, the participants in the debates employed each their Orientalist tropes when casting Chinese actors into stories about mining: Some conjured up yellow waves of intransient Chinese influence and cheap Chinese labor sweeping over Greenland. Others followed the lead from the Puisi business adventure, insisting that the Chinese only desired to fulfil Greenland's needs on its way to independence, without interfering in the constitution of society. Finally, some saw stereotypes rooted in ‘Arctic Orientalism’ confirmed; portraying Greenlanders as lazy people easily lured away from work by the prospects of a sunny day of sailing in the fjords, or too hungover from modernization to show up (Duran, 2012).

A Para-Diplomatic Bermuda Triangle¹⁵

At the celebration of the introduction of self-government on 21 June 2009, representatives from China stood, along with diplomatic colleagues from Japan and Korea, out as some of the more unusual official guests in Nuuk (Naalakkersuisut, 2010: 33). Their presence was taken as a sign of the renewed global interest in the Arctic, which, sparked by climate changes and their consequences, had become “a magnet for different countries’ spheres of interest” (Naalakkersuisut, 2009: viii). Now, the ‘sphere of interest’ of a great power is – in traditional geopolitical parlance – not necessarily a place in which a minor power wants to find itself. However, for the Greenlandic diplomats who formulated this valuation of the increasing foreign interest, the most important observations were, first, the mere recognition of Greenland as an independent agent worth engaging with, and second, the wider perspective of China as crucial to Greenland’s economic development and as a central way of diversifying dependency to the outside world. The interest in Greenland’s mining potential has cooled down lately due to the lower global market prices and possibly also due to public disputes in Greenland over how to facilitate investments while still securing that Greenland benefits. Government efforts have instead been invested in promoting Greenland’s seal fur, seafood and tourist destinations to Asian economies. Simultaneously, the array of possible connections seems to widen, particularly in spheres with a more or less obvious role for the Chinese state; science, technology and communication. However, the relation between Beijing, Copenhagen and Nuuk sometimes appear as something close to a diplomatic Bermuda triangle: efforts towards hooking up China with Greenland have tended to cancel out, even if the Danish part appears to be facilitating.

For decades, Greenlandic diplomats and bureaucrats have found the EU accessible; an organization, that is used to playing games with formal sovereignty in the first place (Mac Amhlaigh, 2014), and that counts Denmark as a member state. Since the 2004 amendment of the agreement between Denmark and the US concerning the defence of Greenland, the Government of Greenland has been regularly engaged in formal consultations about the use of the Thule Air Base just as other possible fields of cooperation have been discussed (Gad, 2017; Olesen, 2018). In contrast, Chinese officials seem – perhaps with Tibet in the back of their minds, perhaps with Greenland’s resident superpower, the US – to have had more difficulties finding out how and whether to talk to Greenland with or without Danish diplomats acting as chaperones (Sørensen, 2018a). Lately, however, Chinese officials appear more self-confident in the Arctic in general, and in relation to Greenland particularly (Sørensen, 2018b).

One example of this increased Chinese self-confidence concerns the presentation of an ambition to establish a research hub in Greenland in the immediate aftermath of the publication of a comprehensive Chinese Arctic policy document. Following up on a memorandum of understanding on scientific cooperation signed in 2016 with the Government of Greenland, the Polar Research Institute of China announced plans to establish a research station of 2000 m², occupying 15-20 researchers all year round. The hub was to be located either in the Northeastern national park or near Nuuk on the west coast (Jacobsen 2019b). The first place is close to the Danish military base *Station Nord*, the Danish *Villum* Research Station and a proposed zinc mine in which a Chinese company has invested (cf. Jacobsen, 2019a). The latter is near the capital Nuuk (and, hence, Greenland’s own main research institutions), the suggested location for a possible new Danish/Greenlandic international research hub and close to a dormant iron mine project owned by another Chinese company (Jacobsen, 2018). The Government of Greenland has not revealed whether it had been briefed prior to the Chinese presentation which took place during

the 2017 Arctic Circle assembly, where the large Danish delegation attentively noted every word in silence. However, with the responsibility over its own science policy, Nuuk holds the cards to negotiate directly with Beijing.

Another recent example concerns the installation of a satellite ground station in Nuuk in cooperation between Beijing Normal University, Greenland Institute of Natural Resources and *TeleGreenland*. The Greenlandic parties are both public institutions. Nevertheless, they failed to inform the formal authorities in Greenland (Lulu, 2017). Aaja Chemnitz Larsen, who then was chair of Greenland's parliament's foreign affairs and security committee, described the fail as "a bit worrying", but warned against getting "scared every time there is a Chinese project" (ibid.).¹⁶

Finally, the recent expansion of China's *One Belt, One Road Initiative* to include a 'Silk Road on Ice' (SCIO, 2018; Anderson et al., this issue) has raised hopes in Greenland that infrastructure and extractive projects might get easier access to Chinese state investments. Related or not, following meetings with Greenlandic prime minister Kim Kielsen in Beijing – during an official visit facilitated by Danish diplomacy – publically owned *Kalaallit Airports* development company shortlisted the state-owned *China Communications Construction Company* for expanding airports in the two major destinations in Greenland, capital Nuuk and Ilulissat with its Icefiord (Matzen & Daly, 2018; Jensen, 2018). On the one hand, the SIK union once again warned against the impact of tax exemption of foreign labor on Greenlandic welfare (Sermitsiaq, 2017b). On the other hand, Greenlandic reactions to Danish geopolitical worries were once again dismissive. As explained by a prominent Greenlandic historian, Daniel Thorleifsen: "Here in Greenland this is understood as a conflict between Europeans and Chinese; not something which concerns us. Many think that Denmark just wants to keep Greenland for itself and therefore does not want China inside." (Breum, 2018). This Greenlandic interpretation of Danish intentions was supported, when Denmark first tried to sell a small, militarily outdated naval base – but decided to take it off the market, when a Chinese mining company expressed interest in buying (Brøndum 2016; Turnowsky, 2016). And once again when the Danish prime minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen suddenly showed up in Nuuk to sign an agreement offering Danish investments in the contentious airport project, followed by an even more surprising statement of intent from the US Department of Defense contemplating investments in Greenlandic military/civilian dual use airports (World Politics Review, 2018).

Highly publicized Danish facilitation of Greenlandic-Chinese diplomatic relations are undermined by Danish political rhetoric and by more or less subtle efforts to deflect Chinese inclinations when they appear critical. So in this process towards independence, a demand for more Greenlandic control with external relations is frequently articulated. To escape from this Greenlandic/Danish/Chinese diplomatic Bermuda Triangle, Naalakkersuisut has claimed that Greenland getting in the driver's seat will "reduce any possible signal confusion considerably" (Naalakkersuisut, 2014: 26). Hence, a recent coalition government programme envisions a Greenlandic representation in Beijing (Siumut et al., 2018: 22).

Nevertheless, right after taking up her position in the new government, the minister for foreign affairs, Vivian Motzfeldt (S), 'liked' a Facebook-campaign supporting a Tibetan political prisoner – but soon deleted the post, possibly to 'reduce signal confusion' (Christiansen, 2018). However, even if the politicians manage to avoid their own lapses into postcolonial solidarity, civil society voices might insist on this casting. When the Chinese ambassador to Denmark took part in the

opening reception of a Chinese film festival in the *Katuaq* cultural house in Nuuk, the Greenlandic deputy minister for foreign affairs and the head of protocol found themselves busy trying to persuade a protester wearing a Tibetan flag to leave the premises (Ritzau, 2018).

In sum, the Government of Greenland presents direct relations to Beijing as a way of setting Danish Orientalist fears of yellow waves of Chinese influence aside. Dominant Greenlandic narratives insist that if China is selflessly willing to fulfil our desires and support us on our way towards independence, Danish foot-dragging and outright sabotage should not hold us back. However, to Greenlandic politicians, it seems, direct relations will also make it possible for Greenlanders to decide for themselves – without the filter of Danish prejudice – *if* China's motives are credibly selfless or at least compatible with Greenlandic interests or, if contrary, then still manageable. However, the more relations between Beijing and Nuuk are direct, the more ever-resurfacing anti-colonial narratives identifying Greenland with Tibet will be a challenge to the nascent Greenlandic diplomatic corps.

Conclusion

For a couple of decades, Greenlandic actors have been imagining China and Chinese actors to take up a number of distinct roles in relation to the two basic narratives of Greenlandic identity discourse; the decline of tradition and the resurrection of the Greenlandic nation in the form of a modern welfare state. Most of the Chinese casting in relation to Greenland have, however, been shaped by tropes known from classic Orientalism, 'Arctic Orientalism' or Western prejudice about China of similar imperialist origin. The Puisi business adventure of the late 1990ies promised – by way of Chinese consumer markets and cheap labour – to be a panacea: putting an end to the decline of hunting as a way of living and as an income generating trade, while simultaneously securing public revenue; however, at the price of removing the 'Greenlandic' taste from the product. Later castings of China have been related more exclusively to a version of the modernization narrative according to which diversifying dependency relations (beyond Copenhagen) is one way of moving Greenlandic identity beyond coloniality. In this, China is casted to play central roles as recogniser of independent Greenlandic subjectivity and driver of its economy, crucial for the process towards a more autonomous Greenland. Orientalist concerns with yellow waves seem systematically to be side-tracked by equally Orientalist visions of Chinese passively waiting to provide for Greenland's needs in terms of investments, markets, and cheap labour. Increasingly, Greenlandic politicians envision direct relations – diplomatic and commercial – not just as a way to side-track Danish prejudice towards China, but also as a way to independently adjudicate Chinese intensions; to see if any of the Orientalist tropes holds true: Do Chinese labour, capital and consumers really selflessly wait to fulfil Greenlandic desires? Does China equal a tide that Greenland can only stem with Danish support? Or do 'Chinese relations' involve a lot of things in between; nuances that can only be known, manoeuvred and exploited, first hand?!

Meanwhile, first-hand experience is starting to pile up, complicating both Orientalist phantasies and visions of unmediated relations. The dreams of cheap labour have taken an unforeseen twist since Chinese workers are now employed to work in fishing factories – rather than with establishing mines – in effect recirculating 'Arctic Orientalist' notions of the lazy, child-like Eskimo unfit for modernity. With direct relations comes the responsibility for prioritizing anti-colonial solidarity – e.g., with Tibet – against one's own ambitions, and for protecting the right to civil

society dissent from the official position. Moreover, it seems that the closer Chinese direct investment and physical presence in Greenland appears to be materializing, the more intent Denmark and the U.S. is to give Greenland offers so favourable, that they can hardly be resisted. With three foreign powers willing to chip in, what keeps Greenland from expanding its range of airports is primarily internal disagreement over location and priorities. Actually, conducting diversified dependence might be a lot more challenging than striving for it.

Notes

1. The authors are grateful for comments on earlier versions of this paper from two anonymous reviewers for *Arctic Yearbook*, participants in an *Arctic Politics* WIP-seminar co-convened by University of Copenhagen and Aalborg University, as well as on oral presentations of partial analyses at the workshop on ‘China-Arctic resources transfers’ at Aalborg University, 25-26 January 2018. Axel Erikson assisted in polishing the manuscript.
2. If there is a pattern to what Greenlandic politicians prefer what ways to cast China, it seems to be whether his or her party is currently in or out of government, rather than party affiliation as such. However, it happens that all the politicians quoted represent one of the two main contenders, Social Democratic *Siumut* (S) and Socialist *Inuit Ataqatigiit* (IA). Most of the quotes referenced in this chapter are originally in Danish or Greenlandic. The authors are responsible for the translations from Danish to English.
3. Hence, this article does not attempt to gauge what neither ‘regular people’ nor decision makers *really* think about China. Private opinions – polled or held by key persons – may, of course, matter to political decision making and strategies. However, decisions and strategies need to be legitimized domestically, and the yardsticks applied are those available in discourse (Wæver, 2002; Hansen, 2006). Moreover, public discourses are what is available to outside actors, when they have to judge the conditions for intervention and interaction (unless they have intelligence to supplement).
4. Of course, nothing in this article should be taken to bear witness on what China or Chinese actors actually do, could do or want to do in Greenland. Until recently, only very few Chinese people or projects have materialized in Greenland. Indeed, a recurring media trope is how ‘Now, the first Chinese has arrived’. (Enkineserinuuk, 2014; Nyvold, 2012; 2017; DR, 2013).
5. For more detailed presentations of (varieties of) the analytical strategy employed and its theoretical bases, cf. Jacobsen (2015); Gad (2005; 2010; 2016).
6. In the spectrum of political parties, marginal voices have separate castings for Denmark: On the one hand, a few insist that Greenland can only progress with Denmark, and a few more suggest that as long as Denmark supports Greenland, Denmark should also be allowed to benefit from the relation. On the other hand, some interpret all Danish intervention as part of a scheme to keep Greenland under control. However, both the mainstream and these marginal voices combine – in each their way – the two basic narratives of decline and modernization.

7. Sejersen (2013) discusses how a Danish ‘double orientalism’ – involving Greenlandic and Chinese Others – opens a transformative space for Greenlandic representatives to reinterpret Greenlandic identity and its relations to Denmark.
8. This section builds on an analysis, first published in Graugaard (2019).
9. This section is an expanded and updated version of a discussion in Jacobsen & Gad (2018).
10. Full disclosure: One of the authors of this article (Gad) briefly handled the case as head of office in the Government of Greenland Department of Foreign Affairs.
11. This section and the following draws on the analyses in Lave & Holgersen (2014, Chapters 5.1, 5.2 & 6.a) and Schriver (2013, Chapter 5.3).
12. Sejersen (2013) finds, analyzing the interview in total, that the Greenlandic prime minister by making a mockery of Danish Orientalist prejudices about China in effect repositions Greenland in a less colonial relation to Denmark. One aspect of this mockery is his tongue-in-cheek racial or cultural identification between Greenlanders and Asians – a tendency which seems to be catching on more seriously with some radical proponents for independence, however, hardly making it to print (cf. Gad, 2018).
13. Foley, in a parallel analysis, concludes that much of the Danish debates should be read as Danish domestic politics (2018: 106-8).
14. Even if projects are still alive (cf., i.e., Jacobsen (2019a) on the zinc project in Citronen Fjord; Bjørst (2016) on the Kuannersuit RRE/uranium project in Narsaq) shifting positions from frontrunner to fallback depending on global raw material prices and – less understood – Chinese priorities (Anderson et al., this issue).
15. The discussion part of this section updates and expands on observations and points first made in Jacobsen & Gad (2018); Jacobsen (2019a) and (2019b).
16. Among the Chinese guests attending the official opening, visiting Greenland as part of a tourist group, a China-critical blogger identified senior military officials involved in tech companies spun off military projects (Lulu, 2017). On the general expansion of the number of thoroughly legit Chinese tourists, cf. Bislev et al. in this volume. The printed material, to which we limit our analysis, does not include castings specifically of Chinese tourists.

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